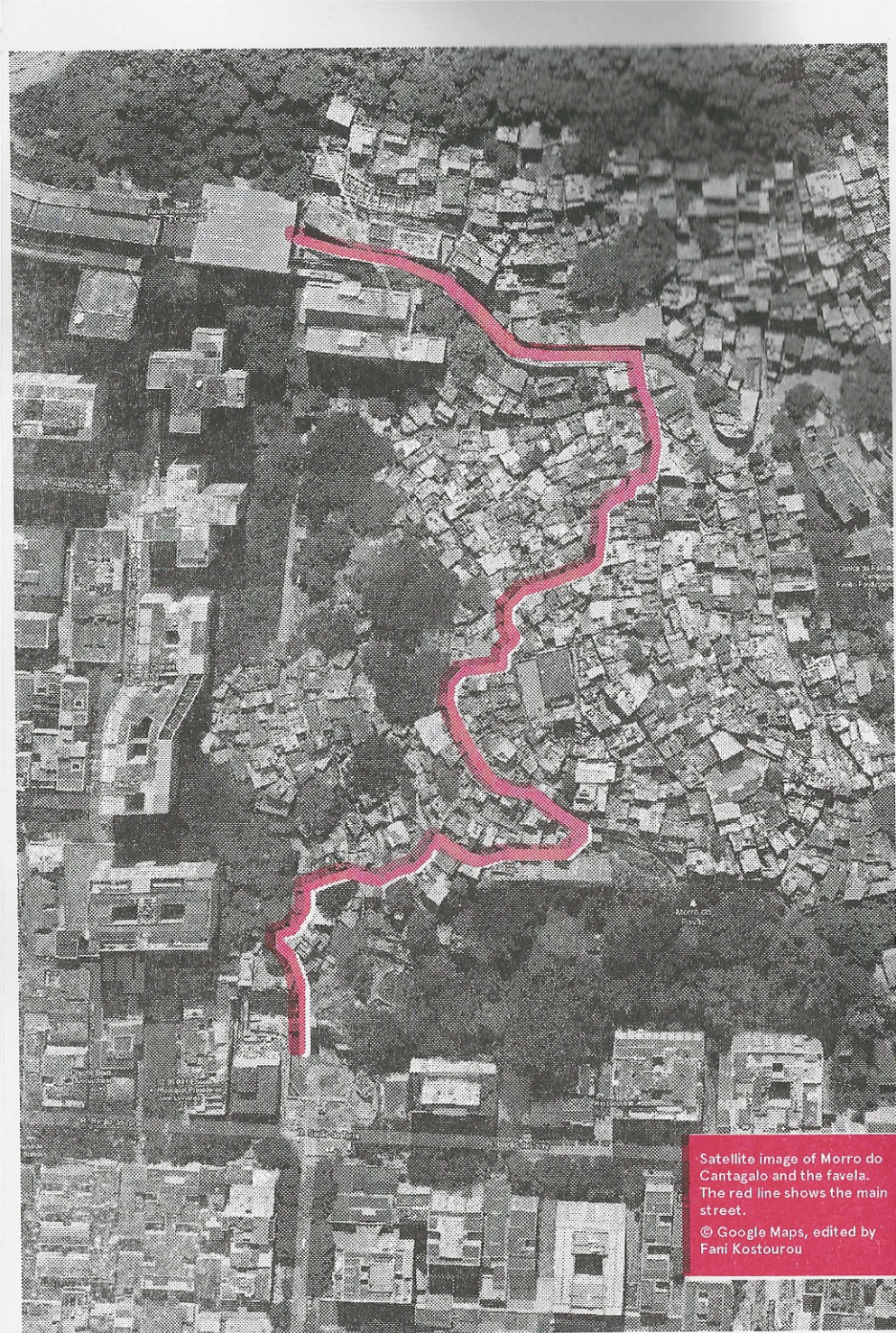


# WHAT LIES BENEATH

UCL Space Syntax PhD Candidate **Fani Kostourou** considers what we may learn from digging deeper into what architects could call failure, highlighting six qualities of informal paths which she argues are worth integrating in formal planning.

A black and white satellite photograph of a densely built-up hillside, identified as Morro do Cantagalo. A prominent, irregular red line is drawn across the image, tracing a path through the dense cluster of buildings. The path starts near the top left, winds down and across the hill, and ends near the bottom left. The surrounding area is filled with a complex, organic pattern of small, rectangular structures, typical of a favela. The red line highlights a specific route through this informal urban fabric.

Satellite image of Morro do Cantagalo and the favela. The red line shows the main street.

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Fani Kostourou





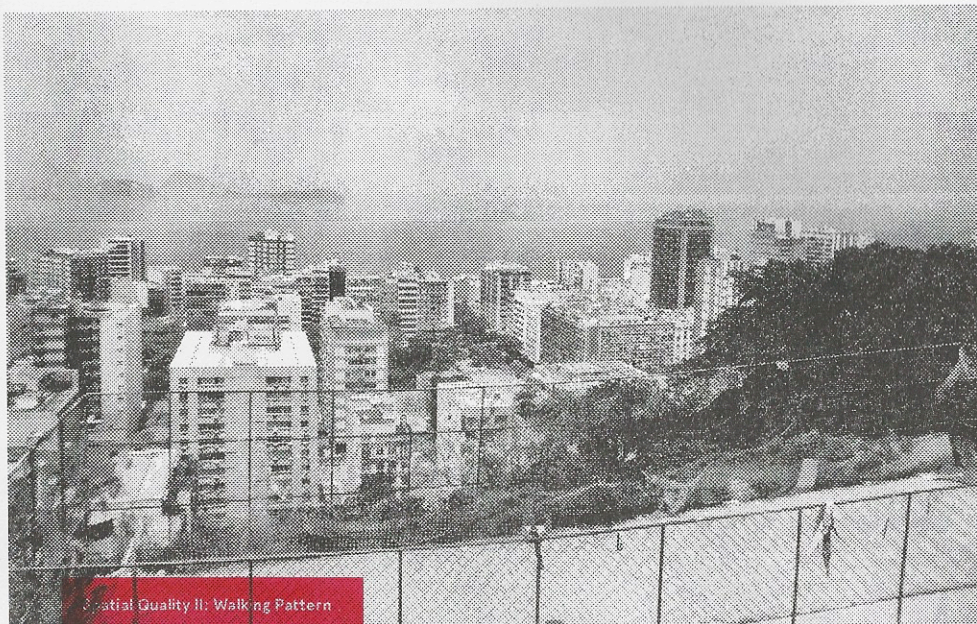
It is becoming clearer than ever that slums constitute an integral counterpart of contemporary cities. Most of the time they are portrayed as inappropriate and perhaps chaotic settings lacking structure and basic infrastructure; desperate for drastic solutions. Otherwise, they are opaque urban zones, spaces of closeness and creativity". Instead of clearing, disregarding or re-inventing them, we as architects and planners can further investigate what most people would call 'failure'. That is to say, there is still room for learning from what isn't obvious to the naked eye.

Looking at the Brazilian favelas, some hidden qualities are brought into the fore. Qualities that not only reveal a greater virtue

of urban informality – that of adaptation to specific conditions – but also are worth integrating to formal planning. In fact, Eduardo Paes, mayor of Rio de Janeiro, in his TED Talk has claimed that "favelas are not always a problem...[but] can sometimes really be a solution". Of course, there is a risk of cliché when talking about 'learning from favelas', that of romanticising. But the pure scope here is to document the ingenuity involved in the furnishing of this world with a 'naïveté' that Georges Perec would approve of. By actually being present and witnessing, we can acknowledge an unconscious bottom-up 'intelligence', the Brazilian 'ginga' of urban space. Let's observe for example an informal street/path, one of the five elements of cities.







#### Spatial Quality II: Walking Pattern

Despite its prima facie complexity, there are distinctive intermediate sub-destinations along the route such as the football field, working as check points, improving its wayfinding. The further the walker goes, the more she can see around the corner. If she keeps on walking and the intermediate destination keep changing, then the movement seems like a 'missile tracking a moving target'.



#### Spatial Quality III: Conspicuity

Even though it is difficult to mentally map the path, eventually, it is not so hard to gain its perception. People always have the feeling of moving along the favela's unique walkway like a spine-path. Since there are no obvious alternative trails, the line of motion becomes 'conspicuous'; a continuous urban 'carpet' running through the community.

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#### Spatial Quality IV: Scale

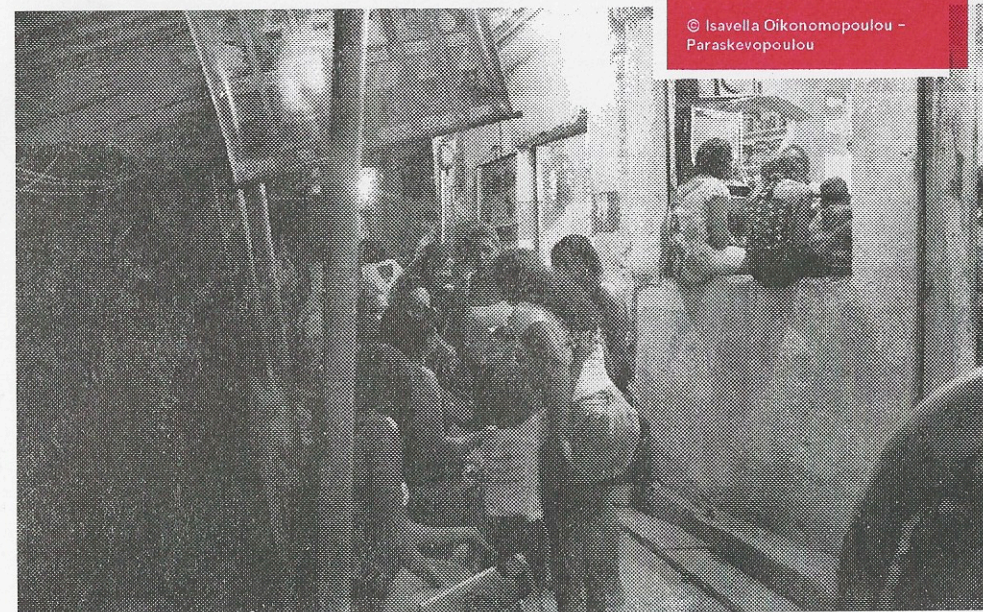
The extreme in narrowness usually force the pedestrians to walk behind one another in ranks, but instead of serious discontentment its scale unconsciously provokes sentiments of intimacy, enabling 'rubbing shoulders'.

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#### Spatial Quality V: Conviviality

Everyone is using the street as a place to see, hear and meet people hanging out or as a place to be seen; and this opportunity works as an element of invitation or attraction for them.

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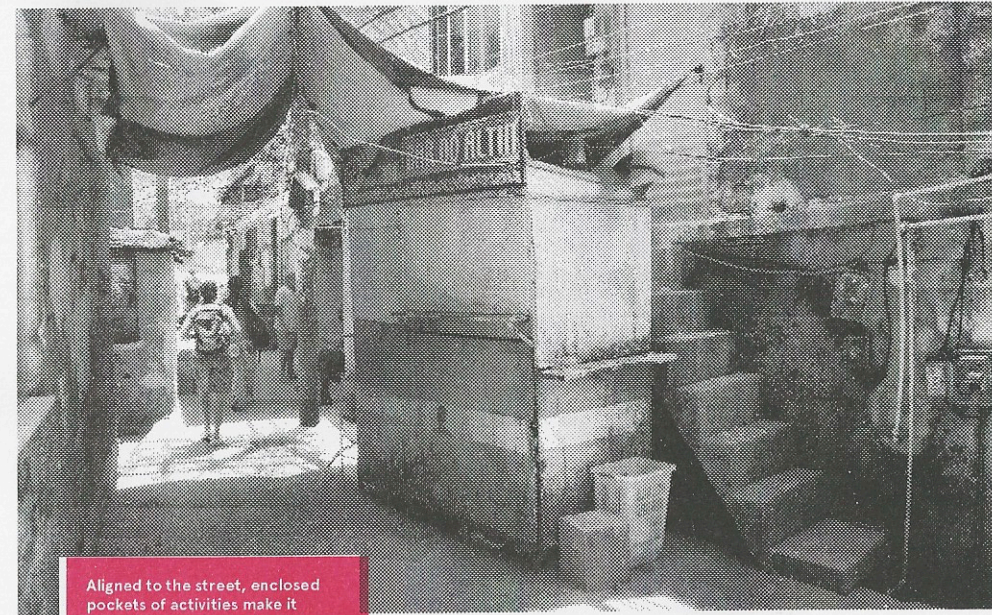
As Perec wrote in 1974: "The street: try to describe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for...Detect a rhythm...Decipher a bit of town...The people in the streets: where are they coming from? Where are they going to? Who are they?"

While walking through Cantagalo favela along the hillside of Morro do Pavão in Rio de Janeiro, one sees that the main path may not look like formal streets or one of Jacobs' great streets. However it serves the exact same purpose: traffic conduit, infrastructure line, common space for access to private property, place of social and commercial encounter and exchange, public showcase, and political space. Through a complete random aggregation of elements the path managed to embrace at the same time all the functions and speeds

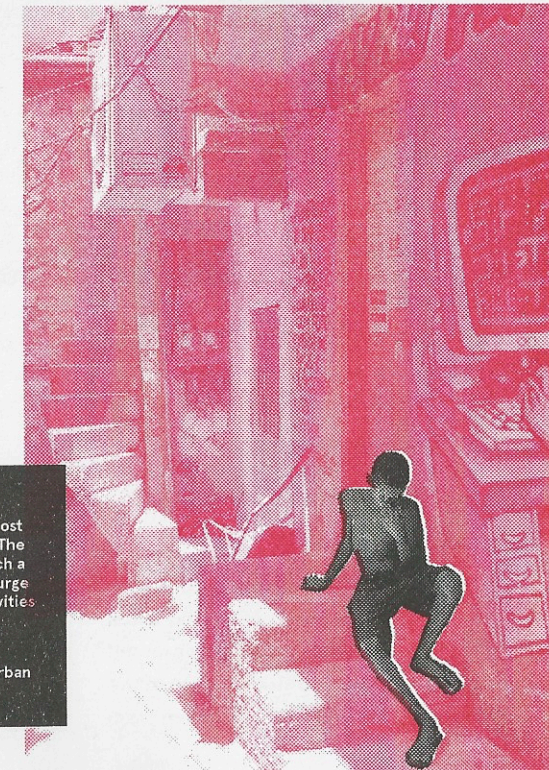
taking place in the favela. Even more, we believe it disposes six specific spatial qualities that offer a direct interest for design: direction, conspicuousness, walking pattern, conviviality, scale and comfort.

Similar to other informal paths, Cantagalo's main street is a veritable stage of gathering where inhabitants feel comfortable spending most of their day. It encourages them to appropriate it making it a working counterexample for the planned streets of the Brazilian 'condominios fechados' and MCMV settlements. The favela of Cantagalo is by no means perfect, nor is its main street; nonetheless it succeeds in retaining the guilefulness found in the everyday life of 'favelados'; a guile that creates and transforms possibilities in space.

1. M. Santos, *A natureza do espaço, técnica e tempo, razão e emoção*. Hucitec, São Paulo, 1996.
2. In the architectural discourse, learning from informality is not a novelty but dates back from 1960's John FC Turner's writings and it has been constantly growing as a fashion since then.
3. M. Angélli, R. Hehl, *Something Fantastic (eds) Building Brazil: The Proactive Urban Renewal of Informal Settlements*, Ruby Press, Berlin, 2011.
4. In his March 2012 speech *The 4 commandments of cities* [http://www.ted.com/talks/eduardo\\_paes\\_the\\_4\\_commandments\\_of\\_cities?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/eduardo_paes_the_4_commandments_of_cities?language=en)
5. *Favelas, Learning From*, Lotus 143, 2010.
6. M. Bense, *Brasilianische Intelligenz*, Wiesbaden, Limes, 1965.
7. *Ginga* basically means absolute bliss or happiness. The Portuguese word conjures up an almost dance-like way of running. It's swinging your body from one side to the other to deceive. It's the happiness found in Brazilian football players and the Brazilians from the lower classes who are often more generous, happier and more willing to try new things. It is the rhythm of the place.
8. K. Lynch, *The Image of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1960, pp.47-8.
9. G. Perec, *Species of spaces and other species*, Trans. J. Sturrock, Penguin, UK, 1997, p. 50-52.
10. A. B. Jacobs, *Great Streets*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1993.
11. Gated communities
12. In 2009, Brazil launched 'Minha Casa, Minha Vida' ("My House, My Life") mass housing programme in order to face a 5.8million housing deficit.
13. M. Angélli, R. Hehl, *Something Fantastic (eds) Minha Casa – Nossa Cidade! Innovating Mass Housing for Social Change in Brazil*, Ruby Press, Berlin, 2014.
14. This is the De Certeau's notion of guile. M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. S. Rendall, U of California Press, Berkeley, 1988.
15. Favela inhabitants



Aligned to the street, enclosed pockets of activities make it natural for the people to stop and get involved. Stores, windows with displays, pocket shops, street vending, signs to attract your attention, graffiti, doorways, people going in and out of them or attraction for them.



#### Spatial Quality VII: Comfort

People in the favela spend most part of their time outdoors. The weather conditions favor such a habit. The narrow dwellings urge it. The heterogeneity of activities amplifies it.

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